

Letter exchange between Sultan Selim I of the Ottomans and Shah Ismail of the Safavids before the Battle of Chaldiran in the Persian language

culture crept into Iraq widely, leaving their mark on daily life, literature, and the arts.

Cultural Iran has maintained its historical continuity

A new development that deepened the rift was the emergence of nation-state formation, which began to get off the ground after World War I. When the Ottoman Empire fell apart, new modern states sprang up across the region. Building national identity quickly shot to the top of the agenda for these states, and the drive for distinctive cultural and political boundaries kept gathering momentum. In line with this, starting in the 1940s, the nascent governments, such as Iraq’s Ba’ath Party, got down to the business of nation-building. Their created identities were defined by novel ideas of the nation and the state, and over time, Iran was cast as “the other” in the region’s political and cultural discourse. These moves coincided with a wave of de-Persianization that picked up speed after World War I. At this point, Britain’s presence also came into play. As the Ottoman Empire disintegrated, areas such as Iraq fell under Britain’s thumb and were brought under direct control. In these territories, new cultural policies were rolled out to undercut the Persian language and culture. In Bahrain, for instance, a British national served as Adviser to the Ruler of Bahrain for around 30 years. This longstanding presence played a pivotal part in cutting Bahrain loose from Iran’s cultural sphere and dimming the standing of the Persian language and culture there. Thus, the political and cultural changes after the fall of the Ottomans, the arrival of European powers, and the onset of nation-building in the Middle East opened up a rift in cultural Iran. As a result, cultural and political Iran drifted apart — an outcome that paved the way for the emergence of new borders in Central Asia. This trend intensified in the Soviet era as the Soviets rolled out systematic policies to weaken Persian language and culture, including a wholesale switch to the Cyrillic script and efforts designed to drive a wedge between Central Asian nations and Iran. Still, even in this new age, the cultural, artistic, and literary elements of Iran and Persian kept going strong throughout the wider region. Although Persian was no longer the official language of the court or judiciary, it remained in use among the in-

tellectual, scientific, and cultural elites of the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia. Religiously, Iranian Islam stands apart from the Islam of the Quraysh tribe or the Arabs. This difference isn’t limited to Shia Islam; Even Sunni communities in Central Asia and parts of Afghanistan show the fingerprints of Iranian Islam. These cultural and religious factors have, over centuries, played a key role in keeping cultural Iran alive. In fact, these features have ensured that cultural Iran has held its ground historically despite shifting borders and politics. Even now, there’s a cultural Iran on one side, while on the other, Iran rubs shoulders with Arab Islam and the Western world. The issue of “othering” came out in the open during World War I, at a time when state-building was high on the agenda in the region. In Iraq, the Ba’athists, Pan-Arabists, and Arab socialists — whose outlook was a blend of leftist and nationalist ideas — set out to cobble together a new nation from scratch. That’s why, especially in Iraq, more than anywhere else in the region, forces worked hard to forge a sense of identity by differentiating themselves from Persian and Iranian culture. During the Iraqi monarchy, Tehran and Baghdad got along reasonably well, but in Iraq’s education, arts, and broader culture, a deliberate push for Arab, Iraqi, and Sunni identity got underway. This new identity-building, often implicitly, sometimes openly, boiled down to defining Iran as “anti-Iraq” and “the outsider”. By this means, Iraq set out to distinguish

its own culture and identity from Iran’s. In Turkey, meanwhile, during Atatürk’s state-building drive, the process unfolded with far less animosity toward Iran, thanks to his relatively friendly ties with Reza Shah. In Central Asia and the Caucasus, Russia and the USSR pursued their own agenda, while in the Indian subcontinent, de-Iranization and de-Persianization went ahead unabated.

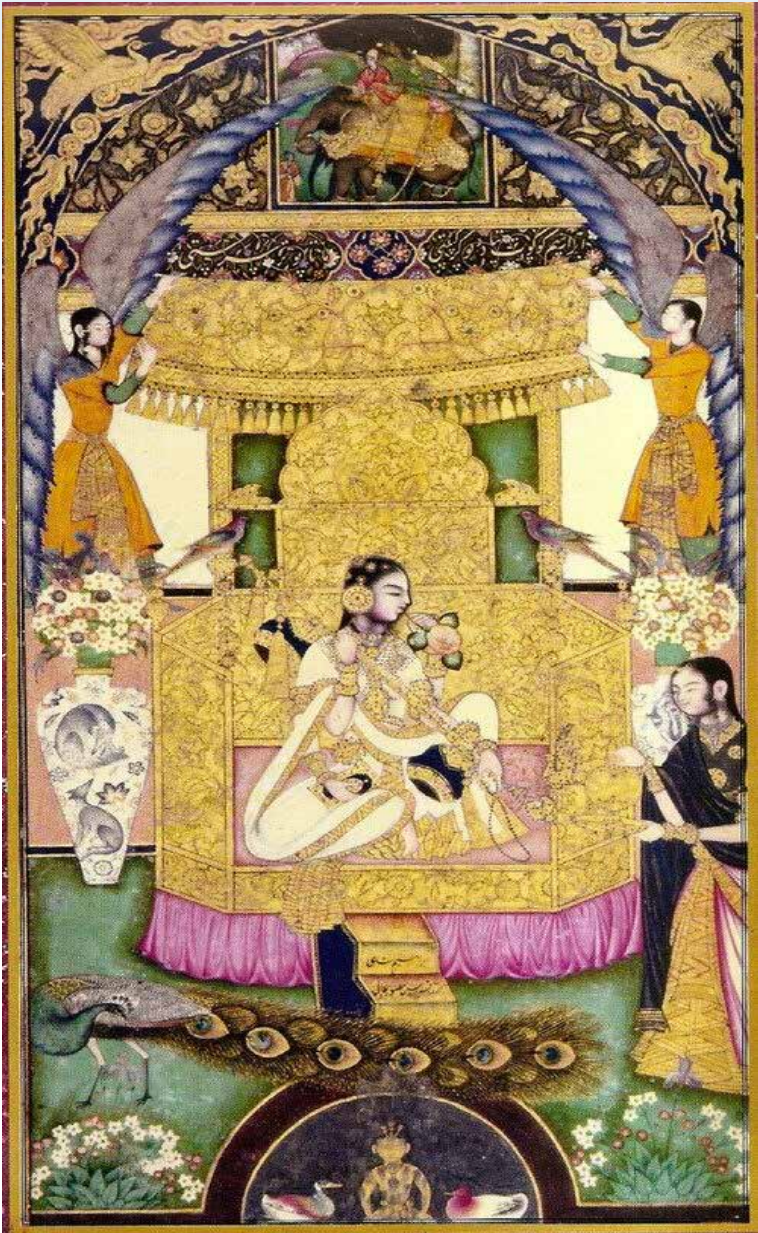
Relying on regional ties won’t cut it economically

On ties with neighbors — especially economic ties — there’s been a strong push in recent years for the notion that regional relations are enough to fall back on, and that if these are well-developed, everything will fall into place and even sanctions won’t hold Iran back. This position holds little water, and there’s little reason to buy it; From an economic perspective, it’s not realistic. The combined GDP of Iran’s neighbors — including Persian Gulf countries — makes up barely more than six percent of the global economy, even at best. So, even supposing Iran could pull off the highest possible level of economic cooperation with all its neighbors — which, given the current climate and sanctions, is next to impossible, — this still wouldn’t go far toward meeting its economic needs. For instance, not long ago, Turkmenistan and Iraq inked a deal on transferring oil via Iran, but since an approval from the US never came, the project ground to a halt. Or in the case of Chabahar Port, the US recently scrapped India’s sanctions waivers for the area. All of this shows that even with fewer restrictions, leaning solely on regional ties simply won’t get Iran over the line economically. Iran is a large, populous country at a crossroads of the world; Neighborly ties alone can’t solve all its problems.

Regional convergence now an uphill climb

Let’s continue by looking at the Iranian and Arab worlds — and at our main priorities over the past few decades. In several surrounding areas, we come across regions where Iran shares common cultural, historical, identity, and heritage with the neighboring Iranian world. That is, greater Iran covers territories where history, language, religion, art, thought, and lifestyle all bear the imprint of Iranian civilization. Zoroastrian heritage, Iranian mysticism, poetry and politics, and pillars of Iranian culture —

wisdom, ethics, and justice — have all played a central role in shaping this civilizational zone. This is the sphere found mostly north and east of Iran — along with parts of Iraq to the west, and on the southern shores of the Persian Gulf. Alongside this environment is a separate environment — the Arab world — which took shape under the sway of the Islam of the Quraysh tribe or the Arabs, a version of Islam that stands in contrast with Iranian Islam, whether in its Shia or Sunni branches. The key point is that in the last 40 years, Iran’s strategic focus has been on the Arab and Islamic aspects of the region, not its Iranian cultural roots. In other words, Iran has poured its energy and resources into the Arab-Islamic sphere and let the Iranian cultural ties fall by the wayside. Globally, since the end of the Cold War, one of the major currents in international politics has been regionalism and convergence — a trend that our region has missed out on entirely. Europe’s regionalism has gone so far as to reach political union and foreign policy coordination. Here in the Middle East, though, regionalism has barely gotten off the ground. Iran’s decision to focus on the Islamic-Arab sphere — not cultural Iran — is the main culprit. Cultural Iran, especially in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Afghanistan (setting aside the Taliban and looking instead at Afghan elites), is largely mystical and secular, which has not really been desirable for us. When it comes to real regional convergence, structural, ideological, and cultural barriers keep cropping up. Worries over Shia ideology, ideological interpretations, power struggles, and geopolitical rivalries are all part of the mix. Within Iran, some political and cultural factions aren’t sold on the idea of closer ties with mainly secular neighboring states. On the other hand, some Iranians with secular or non-ideological leanings see themselves as a cut above places like the Caucasus, India, and Arab countries. This sense of cultural superiority itself has become a psychological sticking point, making regional coordination and cooperation that much tougher. Under these circumstances, to genuinely move cultural and civilizational regionalism forward among Arab and neighboring countries and those within Iran’s cultural orbit, Iran would have needed to take concrete steps — sadly, that hasn’t happened to the necessary extent. Joint TV and media networks with Cen-



Saraswati Enthroned, made by the Iranian immigrant Farrukh Beg in c.1595–1609 at Bijapur, India

tral Asian and Indian subcontinent countries, collaborative university programs — including faculty and student exchanges and cross-cultural research projects, expanded joint artistic and literary initiatives especially through organizations like UNESCO to showcase and protect Iranian civilizational symbols regionally, joint mystical symposiums given the deep Sufi roots linking Central Asia, the Caucasus, and India, and joint productions of TV series, films, concerts, and regional artistic teams — all of these could have gone a long way toward rebuilding cultural ties with the Iranian world. Other countries have gotten a jump on these fronts; For example, the Turks have stitched together the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States and managed to hammer out real cultural and political convergence. Iran, meanwhile, has failed to set up any such structure and has wound up losing out on both sides. Turkey itself has been beating the drum for Ottomanism, Islamism, and Turkism. While Iran has mostly stayed focused on ideology, the Middle East, and the Arab world, it has never gone after a cultural Iran, missing out on its potential. The truth is, Arab states have never welcomed Iran’s role in regional Middle Eastern structures and have always looked at us with suspicion. On Palestine and plenty of other fronts, they have refused to team up with Iran in earnest, always taking steps to derail Iran’s influence in the region. By overcommitting to the Arab-Islamic world, Iran has let the opportunity slip by to reconnect with the cultural Iranian world, essentially making way for Turkey to move in and take over the field.



The photo shows the map of the historical Greater Iran.

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